Chapter 36: The Last Armory

At this latitude, the sun no longer rose or set. It circled.

A band of gold rolled slowly around the horizon, never climbing far above it, never quite surrendering to night. The sky shifted through long gradients of violet and blue, crossed with high, thin clouds. The ice sheet glowed from within, as if lit by buried stars.

The convoy moved across it like an insect in a dream.

Anastasia sat in the lead sled, wrapped in layered thermals and pale fur, her breath a thin vapor in the cold, her gloved hands resting loosely on her knees. The sled's electric treads whispered over the hardened snow, barely disturbing the vast quiet. Behind them, three other sleds followed, linked by a flexible tether of light—both a safety measure and a symbol, Rafiq had said, when he explained the design.

"So we don't pretend any of us are making this journey alone," he'd added, with a crooked smile.

Now, as the horizon turned from amber to deeper copper, Anastasia let her mind drift open, carefully widening the Neural Whisper channel. The familiar hum touched the edges of her consciousness, a subtle flush of structure.

"Zarya," she thought. "Status?"

"Convoy position stable," Zarya replied. "You are two point nine kilometers from Icehold's primary access. Weather conditions remain within safe parameters. Wind speed increasing slightly. No structural anomalies detected in the ice shelf."

"Any chance of an unexpected crevasse swallowing us before we get there?" Anastasia asked.

"Statistically negligible," Zarya said. "I would experience significant dissonance if such an event occurred without prior warning."

"You and me both," she murmured.

She shifted slightly, feeling the ache in her knees. The long-life therapies had kept her organs young, her bones dense, her neurons sharp, but her body still had opinions about cold and vibration. At nearly one hundred and thirty, she had learned to treat those opinions with a kind of amused respect.

"Remind me," she said, "how many times we've been here."

"You have visited Icehold in person on three prior occasions," Zarya said. "Once during its construction, once during the first disarmament reviews, and once after the Plurality Accord,

when it was redesignated a ‘strategic reserve site.’”

“Strategic reserve,” Anastasia said. “Such a polite phrase for ‘we don’t trust ourselves yet.’”

“Accurate,” Zarya said.

She smiled faintly.

“And now?” she asked. “What do we call it?”

“Icehold is currently classified as a high-security relic facility pending decommissioning,” Zarya said. “If today’s protocol proceeds as planned, it will be reclassified as a materials depot and research archive.”

“In other words,” Anastasia said, “a museum and a hardware store.”

“A succinct summary,” Zarya agreed.

The sled slowed slightly as the terrain sloped downward. Ahead, the smooth expanse of ice dipped into a shallow basin—a vast, intentional scar in the earth. At its center, partly covered in drifted snow, stood a ring of dark, cylindrical structures protruding from the ice like the stumps of colossal pillars. They formed an imperfect circle, their surfaces pitted by decades of wind and faint thaw.

Icehold.

The Last Armory.

“It’s smaller than I remember,” Anastasia murmured.

“Your first visit occurred when construction was incomplete,” Zarya said. “Subsequent reinforcement and snow accumulation have altered its apparent scale.”

“Or I have changed,” she said. “That happens too.”

Commander Rafiq raised a hand from the sled behind them, signaling. The convoy eased to a halt at the edge of the basin. For a moment all was silence—the kind of silence that felt crowded with ghosts.

“Anastasia Mikhailovna,” Rafiq’s voice came over the local channel, his Lumina flavored with the soft vowels of his coastal childhood. “We’re here.”

She disembarked carefully, boots sinking a few centimeters into the snow. The air bit at the exposed skin of her cheeks, but the wind was mercifully low. Her breath formed clouds that drifted up and away.

Up close, the entrance to Icehold was visible: a circular aperture cut cleanly into the ice, its edges lined with dark composite. A broad ramp spiraled downward inside, lit by strips of gentle white light.

Around the opening stood a small cluster of people. Some wore the green-and-white insignia of the Relief and Response Corps. Others wore plain heavy coats. A few had remnants of old military decorations sewn onto their sleeves—not as rank, but as history.

They turned as she approached.

“Grand-Ana,” said a young woman with wind-reddened cheeks, offering a gloved hand. “Thank you for making this journey.”

“You’re the one who sent me ten messages in one week,” Anastasia said, taking the hand. “I began to suspect you wouldn’t leave me in peace unless I came to witness your big moment.”

The woman flushed.

“That may be accurate,” she admitted. “I’m Alina. We’ve spoken in the mesh before.”

“The one who keeps asking me if we’re doing enough grief-work around disarmament,” Anastasia said, recognition blooming. “You have an excellent sense of timing, Alina.”

Alina smiled, but there was tension at the corners of her mouth.

“Better to cry before we put the last keys away,” she said. “Than afterward.”

Behind Alina, Commander Rafiq stepped forward. He was broad-shouldered, his dark hair threaded with frost, his eyes tired but steady.

“Anastasia,” he said, bowing his head slightly. “Welcome to the end of an era.”

“Endings are never as tidy as we label them,” she said. “But I appreciate the optimism.”

He chuckled, then gestured toward a cluster of older figures standing a little apart from the others. Their faces were lined; their posture carried a familiar stiffness. On their coats, old patches had been sewn and re-sewn, their colors faded but recognizable: sigils of now-defunct defense forces, scraps of flags that no longer flew.

“They asked for you,” Rafiq said quietly. “Some of them have kept watch here since before the Accord. They aren’t sure what it will mean to… leave.”

“You mean they’re afraid of becoming unnecessary,” Anastasia said.

“Among other things,” he replied.

She nodded.

“Let’s go meet the ghosts,” she said.